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"Culture Stops Development!": Bijagó Youth and the Appropriation of Developmentalist Discourse in Guinea-Bissau

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Abstract: Since the 1960s scholars have criticized the notion of development, arguing that the rhetoric and practice of international development serve imperialistic interests, destroying local orders and colonizing consciousnesses. Through the analysis of the "will to be modern" of a group of young boys living in Bubaque in the Bijagó Islands (Guinea-Bissau), this article shows how the very notion of development can be reworked and employed in an African context, becoming a means for exerting social demands against traditional authorities, and an idiom to express aspirations, needs, and rights.

The notion of development is certainly not a novelty in the African context, and the impact on African tradition of European colonial civilization

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and modernization projects has been a theme in African studies since Isaac Schapera (1934), Godfrey Wilson (1941), and Clyde Mitchell (1951, 1954) analyzed the processes of social change and urbanization in southern Africa. Since the 1960s, and the securing of independence in most African countries, several critical voices have questioned the very notion of development and the impact of developmentalist policies on African cultures, denouncing development as a model of planned social change that favors a single Euro-American cultural and political model and functions as a continuation of the colonial civilizing mission.[1] Representing what James Clifford (1988) called the modernist trope of spoiled authenticity, these authors argued that the rhetoric and practice of international development destroy social and cultural local orders and colonize African consciousnesses.

African youth in particular has been pictured as most attracted to, and easily conquered by, the promises and ideas of development and progress and by the glitter of Euro-American hegemonic culture. Young people throughout the continent have frequently been considered as naive, passive victims of the allures of modernity (see Mbembe 1985, Gandoulou 1989).

In their criticism of development, most of these scholars have failed to acknowledge local resistances to and the creative consumption of discourses, ignoring the subtleties and details of social interactions and also individual points of view. In this article I will use a different approach, emphasizing the local agency of youth and focusing on the interplay between the *concept* of development and the actual *engagement* of youth in local contexts. I will give an example of how the very notion of development can be reworked and employed in an African context, becoming a rhetorical tool for young people to intervene tactically in local social dynamics against traditional leaders in the villages.[2] The idea I would like to put forward is that we should think about development as an imported discourse that nevertheless can be employed by actors to legitimize or subvert power relations. As Sherry Ortner has pointed out,

> the politics of external domination and the politics within a subordinate group may link up with, as well as repel, one another. . . . Subordinated selves may retain oppositional authenticity and agency by drawing on aspects of the dominant culture to criticize their *own* world as well as the situation of domination. . . . Resistance can be more than opposition. (1996:299)

In particular, I will argue, through an analysis of the "will to be modern" of a group of young boys living on the island of Bubaque in the Bijagó region in Guinea-Bissau, that the notion of development (in Criolo, *desenvolvimento*)—a keyword of postindependence national rhetoric—has been appropriated as a local vocabulary and become a critical locution within local dynamics that legitimizes spaces of self-reflection and autonomy and gives young people a respected voice.[3] The logic of desenvolvi-

mento has been turned into a means for exerting social demands against traditional authorities, and an idiom to express frustration, needs, and aspirations. In other terms, my goal is to provide an insight into how young people adopt, interpret, and express the idea of development, "shifting attention from the *content* of social representations to their *use* in historically specific contexts" (Pigg 1996:164) and highlighting how—at the local and individual level—a web of meaning can be reformulated, adapted, and employed to one's advantage (see Mills 1999:98–99).

Though I will not be concerned specifically with gender construction in itself, this article is based on a gender-specific ethnography, as it focuses on young Bijagó males living on the island of Bubaque. Gender-specific ethnography does not, however, suggest gender-blind analysis. Although I focus on young men, I am aware that young women as well are experiencing and negotiating social and economic changes. Although development, modernity, and progress are gendered concepts which have partially redrawn local gender relationships and ideologies (see Mendes Fernandes 1984, 1990), women's participation in processes of social change is undeniable and sometimes even predominating, be it in the informal economy, household management, or migration strategies.

Civilization, Development, and the Rural–Urban Divide in Guinea-Bissau

Even though my main focus here is on the contemporary appropriation of the concept of development, the history of this notion in Africa and in Guinea-Bissau can been traced back to the colonial period and to the postindependence state via the modernization theory (see Mbembe 1985; Karp 2002; Escobar 1988, 1991). According to Philip Thomas (2002:367), "to speak of the rural and the urban, and tradition and modernity is to refer to sedimented deposits of modernist narratives of development and progress that colonialism bequeathed to much of the postcolonial world."[4]

The notion of development, crucial in Guinea-Bissau for the nationalist ideology supporting the anticolonial war and later in nation-building rhetoric, reproduced the schism between village tradition and urban modernity implicit in the colonial project of "civilizing." Indeed, the idea of the incompatibility between development and the most basic social and cultural traits of African communities has oriented postindependence developmentalist and modernization policies in Guinea-Bissau.[5]

The first constitution of Guinea-Bissau, proclaimed in Boé in 1973 during the anticolonial war, claimed that "Guinea-Bissau is a republic. . . fighting. . . for the social progress of its people" (Art. 1). Article 8 declares that "the State has a decisive role in the planning and in the harmonious development of the national economy." In fact, Amílcar Cabral's own conception of development and modernization had an important influence on the early formation of the state's local structures during the war. His think-

ing reveals an underlying contrast between modernity and the rural communities, a dichotomy that was to deeply influence the economic policies of the early years of independence, which witnessed a troubled relationship between rural communities and the ideas of progress and development underpinning the nationalist movement.

Cabral's analysis and economic project were based on the "assumption that the development problem of Guinea lay in the backward nature of indigenous agriculture," and that "investment and proper guidance could integrate peasants into modern society" (Galli & Jones 1987:49). If Cabral saw the preservation of African cultural values as one of the strengths of a nationalist movement, he also thought that his social and economic project was possible only if drastic changes were brought about in rural society. In truth, the postindependence governments always showed a certain ambivalence with regard to "traditional" cultures. On the one hand, they were important elements to be counterpoised to the Euro-imperialistic-colonial culture, as basic factors for the constitution of an African identity, a form of cultural resistance to the process of colonial civilization. On the other hand, the preservation of "tradition" was incompatible with the new social model that the newborn state set out to impose on its subjects.

The *comité de tabanca*, the village-level structure of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), was supposed to be the main instrument of political mobilization as well as the place from which the new nation would be built. As the translation into practice of the PAIGC's ideology of development, the comité represented the goal of developing rural communities.[6] The prevailing strategy, although well intentioned, was essentially paternalistic: development had to be brought to the peasants (Galli & Jones 1987:133). After independence policies strongly supported urban growth, producing a clear distinction between urban dwellers and villagers. As places of economic opportunity, cities in general, and Bissau in particular, were associated with ideas of progress and development, while the rural areas were assumed to be the realm of tradition, immobility, and poverty.[7] Not only the village mode of production but also its cultural and social elements were stigmatized as backward.

Despite the pervasiveness and apparent coherence of colonial and postindependence rhetoric, however, colonial and postcolonial ideologies always acquired specific forms in practice, overlapping with local logics and politics, and allowing room for individuals to negotiate their local reality and adapt a powerful discourse to build an identity and enact personal strategies. Moreover, the impact of the discourses of civilization and development throughout Guinea-Bissau has been far from homogeneous. The Bijagó region in this sense is an instance of late contact with these ideologies. Because of the weak penetration of the colonial administration in the archipelago, its exclusion from mobilization during the anticolonial struggle, and the frailty of the state in the postindependence period, it has been mainly since the late 1980s—with the progressive liberalization of the

economy, the implementation of the first SAP, and the expansion of the development industry in the country—that notions of development and progress have become salient in the Bijagó region, and this influence is still confined mainly to the island of Bubaque.

Praça de Bubaque

For several centuries, the Bijagó Islands preserved a crucial position in the economic and political landscape of the Senegambian region, participating in local trade with Europeans since the sixteenth century.[8] The capacity of the communities of the Bijagó Islands to influence, adapt, and take advantage of political and social regional changes has been documented historically, and the Bijagós were involved in trade, cultural exchange, and "cosmopolitanism" well before the Portuguese settled in the islands and globalization became a fashionable concept. Indeed, as a replacement for the discontinuous and unilinear periodizations implicit in the notion of modernity, a better lens for looking at the archipelago might be the notion of "cosmopolitanism-as-tradition" (as Gable [2006] puts it in reference to the Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau).

The Portuguese occupation and postindependence transformations, however, brought about specific alterations in the archipelago. From the start, the pacification process imposed dramatic limitations on the mobility of the islanders, whose canoes had traveled for centuries along routes that not only linked the islands to one another, but also to the coast (see Henry 1989a, 1989b, 1994; Hawthorne 2003). These events dramatically changed the economy of the islands: from traders and pirates the islanders were forcefully transformed into "peaceful farmers" and "lazy fishermen" (Mota 1954:316–17). Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial administration built and concentrated its administrative services in a small urban area, Praça de Bubaque, and almost completely ignored the rest of the region, where its influence was limited to tax collection.[9] Despite the ambitious plans of Luís Cabral (president of the Republic from 1974 to 1980), the postindependence government's penetration in the Bijagó region was very weak, and still is basically limited to Praça de Bubaque.

With an estimated population of two thousand, Praça de Bubaque is the seat of the regional administration and is the islands' main port.[10] The hospital, the Catholic, Anglican, and Adventist missions, the court, a few hotels, and a market all give Praça the appearance of a small town, attracting traders, students, and fortune seekers from other islands in the archipelago and from the rest of Guinea-Bissau. Even though Praça has gradually become integrated into the regional economy, the island of Bubaque still shows discontinuities and differences within the context of the archipelago.

Since the late 1980s—when development in the region increased enormously with the liberalization of the national economy—Praça has attracted

young men from the rural areas of the island of Bubaque and from the entire archipelago. Young boys move to the small urban center on their own to attend school, to get involved in the market economy, and to make the most of the promises of urban culture. Despite their expectations, however, young people have a thoroughly marginal position in Praça—just as they do in Guinea-Bissau generally (see Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Vigh 2006)—and their aspirations are mostly unrealizable. After the 1998–99 civil war, prolonged economic and political instability caused a total collapse of the state and its infrastructures, while most NGOs and international institutions abandoned the country. The dialectic between global availability and global affordability, therefore, and between fascination and exclusion, triggered manifest feelings of marginality and peripherality among the young Bijagó living in Praça. While they based their identity and social status on the acquisition and display of "modern" commodities, they had limited access to the wage economy, most of them surviving with some help from relatives, involvement in informal trade, or by selling tourist art.

To a great extent the migration of young men to the city involved not only a pursuit of new opportunities but also a contesting or rejection of what was left behind: the authority of the elders and the expected path to adulthood in the village's social organization. Yet as young people rejected the village's notion of adult masculinity, they increasingly found themselves in a position of blocked social mobility in the urban context, in which adult masculinity and social status require education and wealth, which in turn provide access to political power, conspicuous consumption, marriage, and a family. These goals are almost unattainable for the current generation in Guinea-Bissau, leaving these young men consigned, in a sense, to remain young. Despite individual creative efforts (what Henrik Vigh [2006], referring to youth mobilization and participation during the civil war called "tactical navigation"), the opening of wider horizons and the multiplication of imagined and fascinating life possibilities has made exclusion and frustration increasingly evident.[11] On the one hand, young men's imaginations are increasingly stimulated by all that they witness and experience; on the other hand, they suffer from a chronic lack of means.

All the young people I talked to acknowledged this situation, and saw emigration as the only viable path toward the realization of their dreams and a condition of personal fulfillment and respected adulthood. Their internal migration to Praça was in some cases the first step in the complex and difficult migratory paths that, in recent years, have brought some young people to Bissau to seek their fortune, and a few to Lisbon and other European destinations (see Bordonaro 2003, 2009; Bordonaro & Pussetti 2006). But migration is a luxury for most, requiring large monetary investments from the family, efficient networking, and the capacity to overcome increasingly restrictive migration policies. Most young men, therefore, were lingering in a condition of what Jørgen Carling, in reference to Cape Verde, called "involuntary immobility" (2002).

Elders' Authority and Village Social Structure

One of the key words of young men's conversations in Bubaque, reflecting both what they wanted for themselves and what they were rejecting in village life, was a term borrowed from the national rhetoric of the postcolonial state and also from the vocabulary of international cooperation: development (*desenvolvimento*). Indeed, the appropriation and use they made of this concept was entangled in the rural social logic of male gender construction and age-based stratification. Anthropological research in other contexts (Gable 2000; Rasmussen 2000; Rea 1998; Sharp 1995) has challenged the commonsense explanation according to which the "tension between the tantalizing promises of modernity and the expectations of tradition-minded adults may be thought to create resentment among the young people" (Bucholtz 2002:531). According to Bucholtz, youthful challenges to adult authority are widely documented, but the phenomenon is not always connected to modernity in a simple or obvious way, and it is unlikely that rapid social change *in itself* triggers disagreements between younger and older people.

In fact, generational tension is itself a basic feature of Bijagó village's social organization. The main social distinction is between young men (b. *iamgbá*, the children) and elders (b. *iakotó*). Juniors are taught to respect the elders and share their goods with them, and a complex system of age-grades and age-classes leads young men through several steps toward the status of elder.[12] The initiation ceremony (b. *manras*) is the apex of this highly hierarchical, age-based social organization, which some authors have defined as a gerontocracy (Silva Marques 1955:294–95). The passage from one formal age-grade to the next is not automatic, and does not necessarily correspond to biological age. It is, rather, subject to a set of ritual payments to the members of the upper age-grades, consisting mainly of rice, palm oil, fish, palm wine, clothes, and *kana*.[13] The fundamental social philosophy in the village is that one must honor the elders in order to become an elder oneself, in order to grow up. Eventually a young man will be allowed to marry and be acknowledged as the legal father of his children, enjoy social prestige, and receive economic support.[14]

This principle results in a complex ritual structure informing the entire community, an institution called (b.) *n'ubir kusina*. The complex meaning of the ritual is encapsulated in the phrase: *n'ubir* means "ask for" or "offer," but offer with the idea of getting something in exchange; *kusina* designates both the dignity of being an elder and the presents that are offered to the elders. More than a single ritual, n'ubir kusina could be defined as a general concept, a founding rule of the social organization of the village. People at the village describe n'ubir kusina as a difficult path, even though indispensable in reaching adult status. The underlying assumption is that the young men's desired goal is to belong to the group of "those who eat" and no longer of "those who offer," of those who enjoy the gifts and not of those who have to work to give them.

This is not to say that the social organization described above, upon which young people, elders, and anthropologists seem to agree, is static and unchangeable. Indeed studies of the complex history of the region show that the communities of the islands and the core elements of their social organization have undergone dramatic transformations, recently also in response to young men's criticism and negotiation of these rules and their rejection of the elders' steadfast adherence to "tradition."[15] Recently there has been an attempt—especially on the island of Bubaque—to adapt some aspects of the initiation ceremony and of the age-grade system to the exigencies of the young and to their gradual involvement in the social and economic structures of Praça, as well as to respond to the new rules introduced after independence by the PAIGC (Gallois Duquette 1983:25). The length of the manras, for example, has been reduced and limited largely to the school holiday month, and the period of isolation imposed on the young after the initiation ceremony (b. *kabido*) has become looser and is frequently ignored. Despite these adaptations, however, the age-grade system appears to have remained exigent and highly problematic in recent times, at least in Bubaque, where I was able to witness over a span of time how this apparently highly regulated social mechanism is much less flawless than elders would admit. Characteristically, the manras, the vital element in the progression through the age-grade system, is often delayed, paralyzing for decades whole generations of young men, who remain confined to the status of "children." It was frequent during my fieldwork to meet (b) *n'aro* (pl. of *karo*—men belonging to the last age-grade before initiation) who were age forty or even older.

The paralysis of the system can be ascribed to a multiplicity of factors, including the economic difficulties of recent years. Even this cause, however, is part of the larger phenomenon of young men gradually shifting their attention toward the world of Praça; the consequences of their frequent resistance and withholding of their economic contributions to the villages reveal the not-so-easily admitted dependence of the ritual economy of the villages on the money economy of Praça. Despite evidence of recent transformations, appeals on the part of the elders for the preservation of tradition and the young men's stigmatization of the immobility of village social life are very common.

Who Cares for Bijagó Culture Anymore?

The tension between generations in Bubaque gives us a glimpse of the ways in which concepts of tradition and modernity can be put to strategic and ideological use, and how developmentalist ideology can be employed oppositionally within generational dynamics. The young men of Praça pictured themselves as *desenvolvido* (developed) in contrast with the village population, which was stigmatized as backward, underdeveloped, uncivilized, locked in an ancestral past. In this vision, age-grades, initiation ceremonies,

payment to the elders, and almost every other aspect of village life were despised as survivals, fragments of another age, doomed to disappear in order to allow development. When asked to explain why the villages tended to remain closed in on themselves, the boys complained that life in the village was dominated by what they called *kultura* (or *kusa di kultura*, things of culture); along with its guardians, the elders, *kusa di kultura* limited young people's chance to develop themselves (*desenvolvi*) and also blocked the "evolution" of the entire archipelago.[16]

Since these cultural dynamics are best captured in actual voices from the field, I will now present biographical sketches of three young men living in Praça of Bubaque.

Domingo Carlos da Silva was born in 1980 in Bijante, one of the largest villages on the island of Bubaque, with around four hundred inhabitants. It is the closest village to Praça, with just a one-kilometer trail through cashew plantations joining them. Domingo grew up in the village, but decided to move to town when he was seventeen. He attended the ninth grade at the local high school and shared a difficult life in Praça with many others, dividing his time between making a living and attending school. He was intelligent and stubborn, accepting these difficulties as a necessary consequence of his own choices and as a sacrifice for the development of himself, the islands, and his country. Domingo agreed on the general *atraso*—backwardness—of Bijagó kultura. He described the archipelago as the "least developed" region of Guinea-Bissau and, according to him, the cause was excessive attachment to the values of the village. "Kusa di kultura," he used to say, "delay us and hold back our development. We have to abandon them." According to Domingo, education and training abroad were the only way to draw the archipelago out of its condition of backwardness (or *falta di desenvolvimento*, lack of development).

> I was born in a very poor village, Bijante. Life in the village is not very fulfilling for young people. If you grow up in a village, like me, you follow culture (*kultura*), you work. . . . Children do not attend school. In a village, there are many grades. You pass from one to the other, like at school, from first grade to second, from second to third, and so on. We have to undergo all these passages until the last initiation (*fanado*), and when you are finished, you are already too old. You can't do anything else except exploit the younger ones. We suffer from this situation (*no sufri realidade*), and young people have to run away and stay in town, where they have different problems. But they see different people (*odja pikadur diferenti*), they feel the rhythm of the world as it really is (*i toma ritmo di kuma, mundo está asin*).
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> Can you see now how culture worsens young people's life?. . . Most young people move to the town because they want to see the world. Young people must realize that we have to abandon culture. If we cling to culture we cannot cling to school. We have to focus our attention on school. Like this, we get a chance for our future. . . . A young man. . . goes to school. . .

> and tries to develop his mentality (*desenvolvi si mentalidade*), but he does not develop thanks to culture (*mas i ka na desenvolvi pabia di kultura*)!
>
> Elders don't approve if you decide to move to the town. The elders want you to stay in the village, to be a *karo*. At times, we pretend we agree with all that. We don't dare to challenge them, and we say we will leave school and join them in the village. When we go to the village, "What do you do at school? What are you doing?" they ask. . . . They want to drink and eat and that's all. At the village, if you misbehave, if you disobey the elders, you are not respected. If you give food and wine, they all agree! They give you many women, but women have no value at all! You have many women, you have a lot of children and that's all!

The other young men I interviewed also considered Praça a "developed place," in contrast to the rural milieu. Indeed, the villages and the town seemed to be opposite sites of their moral geography (Thomas 2002), spatial symbols of the dichotomies that make up the social myth of development: closeness and openness, backwardness and progress, tradition and cosmopolitanism. As Philip Thomas has said, the rural–urban contrast contributes a crucial spatial element to the geography of postcolonial modernity, and the town versus the country "are tropes by means of which people formulate their understanding of time and place as having been transformed by processes that have fragmented the very landscape of people's lived world" (2002:376; see also Ferguson 1992, 1999).

The use of the term *kultura* by the young men of Praça particularly deserves our attention. Terence Turner (1991) reports that in the 1980s the Kayapo Indians in Brazil started to use the Portuguese term *cultura* to denote their traditional customs. According to Marshall Sahlins (1993), this practice reflected the effort of the Kayapo to keep their autonomy vis-à-vis the state and the world around them. In the case of the young men of Praça, however, the use of the term *kultura* had exactly the opposite significance: not a declaration of pride and autonomy in the face of intrusion from the state or development agencies, but rather an expression of contempt and repudiation.

The penetration of the term in the context of Bubaque is probably also linked to the parallel influence of environmental NGOs.[17] Due to its geographical position and the current lack of infrastructure, the archipelago is a wildlife refuge. A local avatar of UNESCO is the World Conservation Union (UICN), one of the oldest and most powerful environmental NGOs in the region, which has been present in the islands since 1988. Since 1996 it has been taking measures in accordance with the larger UNESCO framework to preserve not only the archipelago's environment, but also its "traditional social values" so as to optimize the transition from a "traditional life" to "sustainable development." According to a 2002 UNESCO report, "the Bijago population has maintained strong traditions and harmonious relations with the environment by cultivating an intimate understanding of

local ecosystems and their management. The challenge of the biosphere reserve is to confront new and emerging economic interests, particularly in terms of intensive fisheries, while preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the archipelago."

One of the key propaganda issues of UNESCO and UICN campaigns is precisely the perfect adaptation of "traditional" culture to natural resources, which has so far guaranteed the conservation of the ecosystem. With substantial investments, the UICN is striving therefore to preserve specific local knowledge as well as the "traditional" culture as a whole with the purpose of creating a sustainable economy in the archipelago (Henriques & Campredon n.d.:1).

Most young people living in Praça did not appreciate these efforts, however. Indeed, for most of them kultura and desenvolvimento were necessarily at odds with each other. One of the most contested subjects and areas of controversy was the issue of school attendance and the value of education.

Delito was born in the village of Ankamona, a few kilometres from Praça, where he moved when he was twelve, against his father's will. Like many young men, he had to bear the burden of education all by himself, because his father did not agree with his decision. "My father wanted me to become like him!" he complained in an interview, embarking on a pitiless attack against the kusa di kultura that he perceived as an obstacle to his development. "Look at my mother. What did she have from life but children? Look at my father. He doesn't own anything. How was Bijagó culture useful to him? Enough of these things that hold us back, that are not useful and don't help anybody get a damn thing! Who cares for Bijagó culture any more?"

"My father," he continued, "wanted me to stay in the village. In the village people live like animals. My father lives like an animal. Yes, people live like animals. They live like this," and he eloquently put the hat in front of his eyes, "They don't see!"

What they did not see, and what Delito, on the contrary, realized, was "how things go, how the world turns"—*kuma ki kusa na kuri, kuma ki mundu na vira.*

Then he put his index finger to his temple and insisted, "They are backward in their brain. Here in Bubaque, in Guinea-Bissau, we have a delay of centuries by comparison with Europe. Centuries." According to Delito, the main reason for this situation was the lack of education and the attachment to "things of culture." "Those women," Delito said as some women and children passed by taking baskets to market, "did they go to school? Do those children go to school? Their parents don't send them to school. If you didn't go to school, you don't even think that your children have to. We are the first generation that starts to develop itself (*kumsa desenvolvi*)."

Xarifo was twenty-two when I met him in 2002. Like Domingo he was born in the village of Bijante. Despite his age, he was attending the seventh grade at the *Liceu* (the high school) in Bubaque.

I was born in a very poor village, the village of Bijante. There isn't anything there. I was born in a village different from other places, like for example Bissau, or here, Praça, where you can have a life that is transparent to other lives (*bu tene um vida mesmo transparente a otro vida*). I am attending the seventh grade. If I had been born in a developed country, I would be in a higher class, but here. . .

I started school late because, before, I stayed there in the village. I only did the "things of culture" (*só fasiba kil kusa di kultura*). We live in a milieu different from others. We live in a very poor place. At that time, someone could come and tell you to put on your costume and go and play in the village square (*brinka na bantaba*). Sometimes you took your notebooks to go to school, and the elders told you, "No! Go and dance with your friends." And you had to put on your dance costume and go and dance in the village. . . . I went through all that many times. I was a great dancer.

However, I have come to see that that life is not a good life. I realized it is not a good life because I came to Praça. I saw other people, boys of my age; I saw how they were dressed. Sometimes in the village people walk naked in the street. I have come to see that this is bad. I came to Praça, I saw how the other boys were dressed (*é ta bisti*), and then I went to the village and I realized that it wasn't possible for a human being to live like that. I tried to move to Praça. I used to sell mangoes at that time. I bought clothes and went back to the village. I wore my clothes in front of my friends, and they stared at me in admiration. Then I saw that boys like me went to school in Praça and I realized that was very good. I enrolled in school here in Praça, selling mangoes to make some money. I put some money together and I enrolled. It was not my father who paid; it was not my mother. They did not help me. I made that effort all by myself. If I had not made that effort, I would still be in that sealed-off life (*vida empatada*) in the village. I have come to see that it isn't possible. I just had to move to Praça, together with my friends. When I moved up to the fourth grade, I moved here in Praça, to stay together with my schoolmates. In my opinion I think I have to make every effort to study and get out (*sai fora*) to free the people from those things. I will free my brothers to help them live in a truly transparent environment.

I think that the things of culture just have to be dropped. We have to work hard at school, for our education, we have to get out (*sai fora*). We have to see how things work, because, you see, this is a very poor country, a very poor country, Guinea-Bissau. And here, on the islands, it is even poorer. Here we are backward just because [in the] villages . . . people refused to go to school and followed the things of culture.

There are people without a job, people without anything. They just go out in the streets. Some of them steal. Those things of culture just have to be dropped. We get out; we see how things work, and how people live. And we bring everything back here. If I get out I will take advantage of those things. I'll come back here. . . . I think it is the best way to "build" (*kumpu*) the archipelago.

Even though education was always a minor concern of the colonial Portuguese government in the whole *provincia* of Guiné, schooling was consid-

ered, at least in theory, one of the primary means by which the so-called *indígena* could achieve *civilizado* status, and therefore a cornerstone of the "civilizing" process. Developmentalist studies and modernization theories in the 1960s and 1970s endorsed the value of education, linking the promises of modernity and socioeconomic development to the spread of schooling. The assumption that formal education for the sake of development was among the primary needs of the population has always been a crucial element in the nationalist rhetoric in Guinea-Bissau.[18] According to Amílcar Cabral, literacy was one of the first goals after liberation, and education was the driving force of development, especially as it promoted a certain detachment from African traditional culture. "The analysis of the economic, social, and cultural situation of the populations," wrote Andreini and Lambert, "showed that development implied the fight against some traditional beliefs, and that education was a fundamental element to overturn these values" (1978:134).

Several scholars have argued that school in Africa is the locus of reproduction of state modernism, and, as such, one of the environments where the ideology of development of postcolonial states clashes with local contexts (Mbembe 1985:45–46). The acknowledgment of these aspects of education and their role in the reproduction of state ideologies and social inequalities, however, must not lead us to overlook the practical relationship that people establish with school and the dynamic character of the bond between the learner and the knowledge that is learned.[19] Lange has noted that even though school in Africa is of an exogenous, imposed nature, "the Africans did not simply receive it—or refuse it: in certain cases they appropriate the school, the discourse on school" (1998:15).

In Bubaque, unsurprisingly, young men's relationship with formal education is crucial. However, far from being responsible for the spread of "modernity" among the "traditional" villagers of the islands, school attendance has been appropriated as a strategy for distinguishing oneself from the culture of the village: for attaining a new form of social prestige and formulating a modern, urban identity. Gudrun Dahl has observed that "in 'modern' society the two most important ways to link oneself with progressive change are by signs of education and by acquiring 'modern' consumer goods. . . " (1999:20). The young men I interviewed attended school as a move toward "development," on the one hand, and as a "sign" of development, on the other. This is the sense in which Kasongo-Ngoy (1989:55), following Bourdieu (1979) and Passeron (1982), considered education and diplomas as symbolic capital. For the young men in Bubaque education, as a signifying practice, is connected only marginally to the acquisition of "modern notions" or to "learning to be modern." Rather, school is a key element of the cosmopolitan, modern identity that the young men are building, a mark of distinction that separates them from the rural world.

In fact, as I underlined earlier, the young men seemed to realize that in a practical sense education in itself could not help them achieve their aims

and ambitions. The prolonged economic and political crisis in the country actually makes it extremely difficult for young educated people to achieve a salaried job and social ascension (Vigh 2006). Education, for most of the boys, is only one step in a complex migration strategy that, however unlikely its success, will, they hope, take them *out* of the country to a place where a true *desenvolvimento* can be achieved.

Appropriation and Creativity

Notions of development and progress that portray rural people as backward and an obstacle to development, or that regard education as a fast track to modernization, have been around in Africa for decades now, though regional differences cannot be overlooked. Recently, several authors have remarked that notions of modernity must be regarded as ethnographic data that must be interpreted in local contexts.[20] Notions of being and becoming modern, aspirations to become modern, are a palpable and potent ideology in many if not most areas of the world (see Knauft 2002:4). How are we to interpret the presence of these categories in local contexts without erasing local agencies?

The opinions of the young men in Bubaque seem to bring us far from the phenomena of reworking or renewing tradition that other ethnographers have described in other African contexts (e.g., Gable 2000; Piot 1999). Pondering the contemptuous descriptions the young men provided of life in the village and their dreams of development, one might even begin to think of them in terms of *tristes tropiques*—just other victims of the advance of a "global cultural imperialism" that is destroying local orders.

We should, however, avoid locking African youth into the dynamics of the mimetic (see De Boeck & Honwana 2005:8) versus the authentic.[21] While acknowledging the historical legacies and the permanence of contemporary national and international discourses of development, as well as the all-too-real marginal spaces produced by the global economy, we should reject the idea of overwhelming hegemonic forces as well as any kind of social and historical determinism, paying closer attention to the evidence of local interpretations, individual strategies, and personal motivations. Without overlooking the structural violence that young men suffer daily (the endogenous and exogenous economic, political, and cultural forms of domination that draw the geographies of contemporaneity in Africa and effectively limit their agency), we have to reject the notion of a colonization of consciousness.

The opposition between rural and urban culture, between kultura and desenvolvimento that I found among today's young men in Bubaque, should be understood not as the reflection of a hegemonic ideology, but rather as a problem of tactical self-representation in a power-saturated arena. Even if we cannot ignore the fact that the young men, despite their aspirations, have been largely marginalized in the urban context (both in Bubaque and

in Bissau), we have to acknowledge that the discriminating language of modernization has opened up discursive spaces of freedom and autonomy, giving them a voice and becoming a critical locution inside local dynamics. Despite their primary, fundamental link with Euro-American political dominion, the categories of development have been appropriated as political and social tools.

The reinterpretation of some elements of the discourse of modernity by certain strata of the population and their use as a weapon of social demands against traditional and postcolonial authorities is a phenomenon that also has been described in other contexts. Louisa Schein, addressing the question of the "particular location [in post-Mao China] of the modernizing project within a transnationally purveyed modernity," observes that "people not only position themselves vis-à-vis modernity through multifarious practices but also struggle to *reposition* themselves, sometimes through deploying the very codes of the modern that have framed them as its others" (1999:363). Other authors have discussed the ways in which "subalterns" may effectively, and for their own benefit, draw on some of the latent oppositional categories and ideologies of Western culture (see Comaroff 1985; Nandy 1983). Mary Beth Mills (1997)—writing on migrating Thai women—has drawn attention to the use of dominant categories (like "modern" and "traditional") to counter local discrimination (on a gender or age basis). Drawing attention to the same phenomenon, Karen Kelsky notes that

> the traditional/modern binary that was once a central mobilizing trope of anthropology, in which modernity is viewed as a "robust and noxious weed whose spread chokes the delicate life" out of "authentic" local and traditional meanings, has been revealed as inadequate to explain ways that discourses of the modern may be deployed oppositionally, for example, by those who seek access to modernity's language of rights against an oppressive state. (1999:229)

While "development" retains a marginalizing and discriminating aspect, it also has an empowering effect for those who seize its power in local dynamics, as the young men are attempting to do in Bubaque. The idea of development works in Bubaque as a social shifter, as a strategy of distinction, or as James Ferguson puts it, as a "cultural style" (1999). We should think about development as a life *chance* for young men, a resource in their struggle to overcome—or at least to point the finger at—the marginality they had to endure in the village (and in the national) context. This mirage of freedom and autonomy is probably one of the greatest appeals that the urban context has for young people who grow up in the village and decide to move to Praça. Since opposition between generations is a structural element of villages' social organization, youth–elder opposition, emerging as a salient element in the words of the young people of Praça, must be thought

of as an articulation between the dualities implied in the idea of modernity and the village social stratification based on age.[22] In other words, the contrast between youth and elders has not been induced by the "external" penetration of the myth of modernity: rather, young people in Bubaque adhere to the narrative framework and symbols of modernity in order to build an independent identity in the urban context, in defiance of the authority of the elders and as a way of aspiring to new forms of power and social status. Development, as the Bijagó example shows, can be a language through which new powers can express themselves and emerge. It is according to this perspective that we can acknowledge how different social forces in local contexts can appropriate the narrative of development, employing its promoting value in local landscapes of power. It is a perspective that I believe may allow us to do justice to local forms of agency, overcoming the rigid opposition between passivity and resistance and stressing instead creativity and appropriation. The concept of appropriation can be very useful for characterizing this process, because "appropriation simultaneously conveys a sense of the active/transforming nature of human agency, and the constraining/enabling character of culture. The term situates agency in the person as s/he takes possession of and uses available cultural resources" (Rockwell 1996:30).[23] Creativity, as Roy Wagner (1981) has argued, is always emerging. But, as Rosaldo and colleagues remarked, "invention takes place within a field of culturally available possibilities, rather than being without precedent. It is as much a process of selection and recombination as one of thinking anew" (1993:5).

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Notes

1. See, among many others, Seers (1962, 1967, 1979); Escobar (1991, 1995); Sachs (1992); Esteva (1992); Hobart (1993); Crush (1995); Ferguson (1994); Smith (1997); Moore and Schmitz (1995); Mills (1999); Cooper and Packard (1997); Biccum (2005); Latouche (2004).
2. I use the term *tactic* according to the distinction made by de Certeau (1984), who links "strategies" with institutions and structures of power, while "tactics" are utilized by individuals to create space for themselves in environments defined by strategies.
3. Foreign words are from Criolo, the vehicular language of Guinea-Bissau, unless prefixed with the letter *b*, signifying Bijagó. The Archipelago of the Bijagó is situated at the estuary of the River Geba, about 30 miles off the coast of Guinea-Bissau. The islands are covered with luxurious vegetation, the sea penetrating deeply into the coast. The population of the archipelago counts about 20,000 people and is not perfectly homogeneous: from one island and the other, some differences are evident at a linguistic and sociocultural level. This is probably due to the different origins of the inhabitants of each island: recent historical works have shown a continental origin of the Bijagó, linking the first settlement on the islands to the migrations caused by the expansion of the Mali empire in the thirteenth century. In the precolonial period the people of the islands were extremely skilled in sailing as they used to sack the villages of the coast, selling the prisoners as slaves to the Western traders. By the end of the nineteenth century and the first thirty years of the twentieth century, the wars conducted

by the French and the Portuguese colonial government put an end to the traditional martial activities of the people of the islands, transforming them into peaceful rice growers and fishermen.

4. See also Pels (1997:176–77); Gupta (1998:8–9,179–80).
5. For the analysis of a case in Lesotho similar to that of Guinea-Bissau, see Ferguson (1994). On the cultural transformation in general brought about by colonial rule and on postcolonial continuities, see, among others, Mitchell (1988); Mudimbe (1988); Comaroff and Comaroff (1991); Comaroff (1992); Dirks (1992); Cole (1998); Werbner (1998); Thomas (2002). Specifically on the continuities of Portuguese colonialism, see Lopes (1999:238ff.); Feldman-Bianco (2001); Carvalho and Pina Cabral (2004); and *Identities* 8, 4 (2001).
6. See Lopes (1982:49,47–51; 1987:35–36,52–53); Andreini and Lambert (1978:38–39); Chabal (1983:108–9); Dhada (1993:55ff.).
7. The tendency of the state to consider the towns as its main political and economic objectives obviously triggered an internal migration towards the urban centers. According to Lopes (1982: 84,91,113), in 1979 Bissau had a population of 110,000. With only 16% of the population, the capital city enjoyed a kind of socioeconomic autonomy, with a concentration of 50% of the investments and 80% of the budget. The economic policies issued by the state following the requirements of the IMF pushed many people to search for alternative and informal survival strategies in town (Padovani 1993:159). According to the 1991 general population and housing census, Guinea-Bissau had 979,203 inhabitants and an annual growth rate of 2.3% between 1979 and 1991. During the same period the urban population increased from 14.2% to 20%. The population of the capital city Bissau grew from 80,000 in 1975 to around 400,000 in 1998 (before the war) (Scantamburlo 1999:16).
8. See Bowman (1997); Brooks (1993); Forrest (2003); Hawthorne (2003); Henry (1994); Mark (1985, 2002).
9. In Guinea-Bissau the term *praça* nowadays means "urban center." In Portuguese this word has several meanings: square, marketplace, but also garrison, fortress, and stronghold. It is with this latter meaning that the Portuguese called their first garrisons along the coasts of Africa *praças*, and since it is mainly around these outposts that the urban centers grew through the centuries, the term in Guinea-Bissau has the meaning of "town." In the archipelago the term is used to identify the urban center of Bubaque as opposed to the villages (*tabanka*). The complete denomination therefore should be *Praça de Bubaque*, but this name is used only when one is outside the archipelago.
10. The population figure was provided in 2002 by the local administration at my request. According to a study commissioned by the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa* (INEP) on the archipelago in 1990 (INEP 1990), Bubaque in 1990 had a population of 2936, with 1662 living in the villages and 1274 in the Praça.
11. Child soldiers are a common and upsetting phenomenon throughout Africa. In Guinea-Bissau, however, despite youthful participation in the civil war, there was no evidence of direct involvement of children in warfare.
12. Age-grades and age-classes are quite common features of African societies and have therefore been a central topic in Africanist anthropological literature, at least since the publication of Evans-Pritchard's monographs on the Nuer (1940) and the volume the same author co-edited with Meyer Fortes, *African Political Systems*, published in the same year.

13. The *kana* is a distilled beverage made from sugarcane by-products such as molasses and sugarcane juice.
14. This ethnography is based on Henry (1994), although it is not intended to be an exhaustive description of the social organization of the villages of Bubaque. For ethnographies of the communities of the islands produced in the postindependence period, see Scantamburlo (1991); Gallois Duquette (1983); Mendes Fernandes (1989, 1995); Henry (1994); Sousa (1995); Pussetti (1999, 2001, 2005).
15. See Brooks (1993); Gallois Duquette (1983); Hawthorne (2003); Henry (1994); Mark 2002.
16. Another term with the same meaning often employed was *tradisson* (tradition), often used in the phrase *tradisson di Bijagó.*
17. For a similar example from another context, see Grove (1995).
18. For an overview of modernist theories of education, see McGinn and Cummings (1997). For an analysis of the importance of literacy in the nationalist modernist discourse in West Africa, see also Rathbone (2002).
19. See Kulick and Stroud (1993); Lave and Wenger (1991); Street (1993).
20. See Comaroff and Comaroff (1993); Ferguson (1999); Pigg (1996); Rofel (1992); Schein (1999).
21. Brian Larkin has argued that recent work in African studies and media studies "has been dominated by the focus on local 'resistance' to various forms of 'dominant culture,'" adopting a "reductive binary distinction between oppression and resistance" and "reaffirming cultural imperialism at the same moment as critiquing it. It is as if the periphery could not have an experience independent of its relation to metropolitan centers" (1997:408).
22. This is also the case in other African contexts. See, e.g., Argenti (2002); Bayart (1984, 1989); Gable (1995, 2000).
23. I would like to thank Lotte Meinart of the University of Aarhus for suggesting this quotation.